

Kim

.....
Press Complaints Commission

PRIVATE AND CONFIDENTIAL

From the Chairman

Les Hinton, Esq.,
Executive Chairman,
News International plc.,
1 Virginia Street,
Wapping,
London E98 1XY

9th June 2003

- Chairman
Sir Christopher Meyer
- Members of the Commission
Matti Alderson
Roger Alton
Professor The Lord Chan
Edmund Curran
Paul Dacre
Jane Ennis
Mary Francis
Dr. Arthur Hearnden
Vivien Hepworth
Paul Horrocks
Professor Robert Pinker
David Pollington
Dianne Thompson
The Right Rev. John Waine *rcvo*
Neil Wallis
- Director
Guy Black

Dear Les,

I wanted to write privately to you in advance of our dinner on Wednesday about one particular Code issue that has been vexing me.

I have found my first ten weeks in the job fascinating beyond measure and I much look forward to telling you more about them.

One issue that has kept coming up – both directly and in correspondence with a number of individuals since I arrived – relates to the perennially thorny problem of the children of public figures and the manner in which some of them are, from time to time, reported in newspapers and magazines. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that I have detected it to be perhaps the single most incendiary issue between the press and public figures in a way which in turn moulds (not for the better) their views of the PCC, self regulation and the industry in general. For that reason alone it merits serious attention and thought from us.

At the moment the Code already recognises that the children of people in the public eye – whether by fame, notoriety or position – are particularly vulnerable to being placed unfairly in the media spotlight and therefore have a special position which needs protection. This principle is a sensible one, and all editors, I believe, readily acknowledge it.

My concern is that the protection is probably too narrow to be useful, and indeed simply raises expectations without being able to deliver anything. It would not protect, for instance, very young children of public figures who do not already have “a private life”; it does not protect those who have left school but still deserve, in my view, anonymity at University; it doesn’t do anything to stop newspapers writing about details of children that cannot be considered “private” such as where they go to school or their exam results; and so on/

/

.....
Press Complaints Commission

Public figures, of course, are used to attention, often court it, and have to put up with it. But I have never seen the reason their children should have to do so – except of course where the public interest is served by media attention on them (crimes, serious misdemeanour, hypocrisy and so on). Even where public figures use their children, I can still see some role for the Code in protecting their welfare until they are old enough to make their own decisions.

This is an issue which is going to reach its head in a number of adjudications we will have to reach shortly. And my sense of the current state of political and public debate is that this is an issue with which it would be timely for the industry to grapple.

I don't – and won't – ever ask for special treatment for anyone. But that principle is already granted in the Code. I simply think we should make it real and effective. There would be relatively simple ways of doing so – for instance building on the terminology in 6(i) and amending 6(v) to something along the lines of: “special regard should be paid to the potentially vulnerable position of the children of those in the public eye and no material about them should be published which would undermine their security or welfare”.

This is only an example of how we might tackle this subject – but is, I hope, useful because it builds on the welfare principles already contained in the Code. It is important to underline that this would also apply to the children of public figures at the local level as well, something the PCC has had to try and deal with in the past on the back of adjudications.

Let's talk about this on Wednesday. There is real pressure here, and if we can get it right we would – I think – be doing something genuinely good not just for self regulation and the PCC, but for the more general public interest.

With very best wishes.

*Yours ever,
Christopher*

Sir Christopher Meyer